論　著

The Cult of Domesticity in Republican Shanghai's Middle Class**

Susan Mann*

When I went to Shanghai in 1988 to conduct research on women's work in presocialist society, I was studying one immigrant group: people who moved to Shanghai from the "Ningpo" area.① I chose the Ningpo community partly because of my interest in the history of Chinese banks

* Professor, Department of History, University of California, Davis

** I thank Ruth Rosen for conversations that shaped the writing of this paper, and G. William Skinner for comments that clarified an early draft. I am also grateful to the members of the China Colloquium at the Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, who invited me to discuss the findings presented in this paper on 25 January 1990. Research on which most of the paper is based was conducted in Shanghai from September through December 1988, under a grant from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, of the National Academy of Sciences. My sponsoring unit in China was the Institute of Economics of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. I am indebted to them, and especially to Yao Hsin-jung of SASS.

① This area, as defined by Ningpo people and the Ningpo guild, consisted of seven counties (*ch'i-i* 七邑): Yin 鄞, Tz'u-ch'i 慈谿, Feng-hua 奉化, Chen-hai 鎮海, Ting-hai 定海, Hsiang-shan 象山, Nan-t'ien 南田. In 1929 the Ningpo area had an estimated population of 2,335,110 (THHYK 73 [Aug.1929]:s.p.2). The Ningpo

© 中央研究院近代史研究所

(*ch'ien–chuang*): Ningpo is an old banking and commercial center along the coast, about six hours to the south of Shanghai by ferry. An additional reason for focusing on the Ningpo community was its high visibility in Shanghai during the Republican period. If Su–pei people were at the bottom of Shanghai's stratification system (Honig 1989), Ningpo people were surely at the top.

That Ningpo people represented themselves as part of Shanghai's elite is striking, in view of the fact that Ningpo people could be found at nearly every level of Shanghai's occupational structure.② Ningpo entrepreneurs, to be sure, made up the core of Shanghai's financial elite, the bankers. Further down the job hierarchy, Ningpo men were also successful retailers, managing department stores, hardware stores, furniture shops, and Chinese pharmacies. But Ningpo people could also be found clerking and running errands in these same companies. As independent artisans, they were known for being skilled carpenters and coppersmiths. And at the bottom of the job hierarchy, on the docks, Ningpo men toted loads as longshoremen; some pulled rickshaws. Ningpo traders also played a key role in Republican Shanghai's lucrative drug traffic, though information about this part of their entrepreneurial history is extremely hard to come by. Finally, through their connections with the underworld Green Gang, Ningpo men dominated a large sector of the factory labor force as labor contracters. But I was to discover that Ningpo rhetoric denied the cross–class diversity of the Ningpo community

---

Guild journal counted 700,000 subscribers, 60% of them literate (THHYK 49 [Aug.1929]:n.p.), and estimated that its membership was a mere fraction of the total Ningpo population sojourning abroad (THHYK 2 [1921]:47). Guild membership in Shanghai alone was about 35,000 in 1946. On the size and composition of the Ningpo Guild, see f.n. 6, below.

② A foreign travellers' guide to Shanghai published in 1920 observed that "compradores, store–keepers, carpenters and craftsmen generally, sailors, sampan men, the best house–boys all hail from Ningpo..." See Darwent 1920:76.

in Shanghai. Part of that denial of diversity was asserted through what I shall call the Ningpo cult of domesticity.

When I went to Shanghai I assumed that because Ningpo men were so prominent in the economy, Ningpo women would also be well represented in the workforce. For example, I thought they might be leaders in the professions, or cornering the cream of the cotton mill jobs, or making their way as civic leaders and secretaries.③ Instead, what I was told time after time as I asked women about their work was that "Ningpo women didn't go out to work." Ningpo women never took factory jobs. Ningpo women stayed home. By contrast with their menfolk, it seemed, Ningpo women were nearly invisible in the occupational hierarchy of presocialist Shanghai. I knew from Gail Hershatter's work (1989:471–72, and 1991:263) that some Ningpo women were prostitutes, because the most affluent and visible Ningpo patrons insisted on women from their own native place. I knew from missionary writings that Ningpo women worked as domestics in the foreign concession, where they established a firm network of referrals in the expatriate community. Emily Honig's study of Shanghai's cotton mills showed that Ningpo women cornered some of the better factory jobs, especially working as "Number Ones" – shop floor supervisors (Honig 1989:250–51; Honig 1986:57–78). But when I went out into the Ningpo neighborhood to collect work histories, and interviewed retired factory managers and women workers, I was met with the same response time after time. The question "Did you go out to

③ A list of women's occupations in Shanghai published in 1935 identifies the following occupations for the more than one million working women in the city: factory workers (over 200,000), domestics (more than 80,000), teachers, shop clerks, nurses, professionals (doctors, accountants, attorneys), movie stars, dancers, singers, bar hostesses, telephone operators, prostitutes, vendors, and custodians. See *Nü sheng* (Women's cry) 3.12 (30 April 1935): 6–8 [Part I] and 3.13 (15 May 1935): 11–12 [Part II].

work?" brought the unvarying reply: "Never." Ningpo women stay at home, I was told, and relied on their menfolk to support them. Of course, I was told with an occasional sniff, there were those who did "go out," but they were women with underworld connections, not respectable women, and they did not uphold the "standards" of the Ningpo community which, I was told repeatedly, are "very strict" (*Ning–po te kuei–chü hen chung*).

These are exactly the words that I became accustomed to hearing: Ningpo people speaking with one representational voice, heedless of class and status differences. From the imposing edifice of the Ningpo Guild Hall on Tibet Road, a neo-classical concrete-faced and columned building constructed in 1921, Ningpo people presented a united front to the Shanghai metropolis.④ "We Ningpo people," they were fond of saying, "are thus and so."⑤

It is the remarkable ability of the Ningpo community, which so clearly cross–cut class, to speak with one voice about the codes governing "Ningpo women" that started the series of questions leading to this article. Naturally I was skeptical of this unitary voice when I first encountered it, but after a while it took on its own social meaning. Clearly, no matter how many statistics I might be able to muster to demonstrate that Ningpo women did go out to work, I was not going to change what my informants insisted they themselves had done, and more importantly, what they believed was the proper thing for a Ningpo woman to do.

---

④ See THHHK new ser. 5 (20 October 1946):3.

⑤ In 1946 the guild journal published an occupational breakdown of guild membership. It showed a total of 34,968 members in the following proportions: 64% merchant, 7% worker, 3% scholar, 1% seamen, 0.6% government, 0.09% army, 23.2% other (THHYK new ser.4 [10 October 1946]:4). A similar estimate is given in *Ning–po pang* 1989:43. The elite composition of the guild, brought home to me by informants' comments, is reflected in the dues: a minimum of 1,000 *yuan* per year for a "regular" (*p'u–t'ung*) membership in 1947. See THHHK 10 (5 January 1947):5.

After interviewing more than forty Ningpo women from modest backgrounds, all of whom insisted that Ningpo women did not go out to work (and here I include interviews with hatweavers in rural areas outside Ningpo itself), I was taking a discouraged break in the library reading old Ningpo Guild journals. There I encountered the *coup de grace*. The journals I was reading had published the names and occupations of all couples married in mass weddings⑥ in the Ningpo Guild Hall in 1946–47. Of 1,088 women who participated in these marriage ceremonies, 966 – 89

⑥ Mass marriages were part of Chiang Kai–shek's campaign to reform popular culture called the New Life Movement. The first ceremony, according to Florence Ayscough (1937:64–65), was held in Hangchow on 15 March, 1935, with nine couples participating:

> "On April 3 of the same year, fifty–seven couples were married before mayor General Wu Teh–chen at the magnificent new Civic Centre of Greater Shanghai. A brass band played the bridal march from 'Lohengrin' and ten thousand people pressed against police cordons to catch a glimpse of the wedding couples. The brides, carrying bouquets, were dressed in pale pink, with pale pink caplike veils. They proceeded in a long line to meet the grooms who were clad in long blue robes, and short black jackets each decorated with a scarlet badge. Brides filed from the west of the building, grooms from the east, marched around the circular driveway, and up the white stone steps into the great hall. Here on a stage, decorated in scarlet and gold, where stood two immense red candles embossed with Chinese characters reading 'Harmony for one Hundred Years', waited the witnesses. Two brides and two grooms at a time, coming from left and right simultaneously, mounted the stage, stood before a bas–relief of Doctor Sun Yat–sen, over which the Kuomintang and National flags were crossed, and awaited directions. The announcer indicated that they bow: three times to the flag and the portrait of Doctor Sun, twice to each other, and once to the witnesses. Each couple then received a wedding certificate and a silver crescent engraved with plum blossoms – a gift from the Mayor – and bowing once more, left the stage. When the ceremony had been repeated the necessary number of times brides and grooms, together now, were led from the hall by lantern–bearers."

percent – described their occupation as "housewife" (*chia–shih*). And these were hardly women from high-income families. Most of them married factory workers, artisans, shop clerks, rickshaw–pullers, longshoremen. In fact, their very participation in a mass marriage ceremony marked them clearly as members of what Yeh Wen–hsin has called Shanghai's petty urbanites.⑦

Of course, it is true that what people *say* they do on a marriage application (or in an interview with a foreigner), and what they *actually* do, may be two entirely different things. Still, even if these young women (most of them in their late teens or early twenties) were workers who

---

⑦ Yeh Wen–hsin, "Shanghai's Petty Urbanites," unpublished paper presented at the Labor History Conference, University of California, Santa Cruz, spring 1988. Although workers were underrepresented in the Ningpo Guild (see note 5, above), they made up the majority of grooms married in the mass ceremonies in the guild hall, which were open to all Ningpo people after who submitted proper fees and applications. The guild itself acknowledged that it represented only a small fraction of the total Ningpo population in Shanghai, the vast majority of whom were workers. See THHYK 2 (1921):47. [Tables listing the name, age, native place, and occupation of all couples married in the Ningpo guild hall were published in THHHK during 1946 and 1947. Computer analysis of this data is now complete.] According to Ayscough, mass marriages cost about twenty dollars a couple, and were regulated by the municipality: you had to be over 20 years of age, pay five dollar registration fee, wear simple clothing for the application interview. Applications were accompanied by six photos, and there was a waiting period of about two weeks for "investigation" by the Social Affairs Bureau, pending approval. As a result, "[n]aturally those who can afford private ceremonies prefer to have them, the rich will continue on their individual way; but for teachers, students, and people of lesser income Mass Marriage is convenient" (Ayscough 1937:66). For a slightly earlier description of a private ceremony, see Gamewell (1916:161–65). She observed: "The old–time wedding procession is no longer an every day sight in the International Settlement, though happily for lovers of the antique, still common about the Chinese City. Carriages have to a large extent superseded the gorgeous sedan chairs, draped with embroidered crimson satin, and pale pink silk the orthodox crimson satin wedding gown... often...there is a painfully inartistic combination of Chinese and foreign styles (p.161)."

merely intended to become housewives after marriage, or workers who simply wished to be thought to be housewives, the social import as far as I was concerned was the same. Ningpo people represented themselves as a community where women stayed at home and did not go out to work.

As it was spelled out in detail, with examples and explanations, the code I heard from Ningpo women – whether they could actually observe it or not is a question I leave aside in this paper – began to resemble "the cult of true womanhood," or "the cult of domesticity," that shaped the outlook of generations of women born in or heir to the Victorian era in England and North America.

So I was led to wonder if the ideology had the same causes. Did similar historical conditions produce a similar type of gendered discourse in industrializing China and the industrializing West? To answer this question, I will view the Ningpo ideology of domesticity through five different lenses. As we shall see, despite its remarkable resemblance to North American ideologies of domesticity, and despite the undeniable foreign influence that might have informed its language, the cult of domesticity in Republican Shanghai was entirely Chinese in its cultural content and its aims, few of which would have made any sense at all to Victorian women – or their menfolk. My focus moves from the universal to the particular, from the world and the nation to the household.

First lens: bourgeois ideology

The handiest explanation for the pervasive cult of domesticity among Ningpo women is one based on a universalizing Western model: the Victorian experience. In this view, the Ningpo case might represent a perfect feminist case of history repeating itself: similar economic, social, and political changes produce comparable ideas about gender – across

time, space, and culture.

Republican Shanghai saw many of the transformations historians of the Victorian era have associated with the rise of a "cult of domesticity" in late eighteenth-century New England – in particular, the growth of industrialization, the separation of home and workplace, and the growth of an urban bourgeoisie.⑧

Though the industrialization process had a different cultural context in Shanghai and New England, it was accompanied – it appeared to me – by a remarkably similar ideology of domesticity. As in New England, the Ningpo canon of domesticity called on women to symbolize and sustain traditional values and practices of work and family organization; to be self-renouncing, to "serve and to please" others by the constant performance of tasks in the home (Cott 1977:64–74). No education was thought necessary for this role, apart from careful instruction by one's own mother or another female relative. And as in New England, the source of economic support for the family was to be the man, a wage-earner whose leisured wife was

---

⑧ On Shanghai's industrial growth in the Republican period, see Rawski 1989; on social change and class formation in early 20th-century Shanghai, see Bergère 1981, esp. pp.1–14. For a sweeping characterization of changes in New England, see Cott 1973:3. As in the United States, these changes associated with early industrialization were accompanied by the breakdown of the household as a unit of production. One hallmark of the change, noted by critics in Shanghai and described by Ruth Rosen in her study of prostitution in the U.S., was the growth of a new and vulnerable group of women workers who, sent out to the cities to find jobs as domestics or factory workers, turned to work as prostitutes to survive (Rosen 1982:2–3). The simultaneous emergence of prostitution as a form of women's work, and the growth of an industrial labor force, led reformers to conflate the two: women who "went out" were potentially, if not actually, selling their bodies. The outcry condemning prostitution in Shanghai may closely resemble the movement for "social purity" in early 20th-century America described by Rosen: there is evidence that it was, like the American movement, part of an effort to control the behavior of the laboring poor, conducted in the name of feminism and social reform.

one symbol of his status in the larger society.

By embracing the cult of domesticity, I thought, Ningpo people were confirming their place at the center of Shanghai's emerging bourgeoisie. This need to affirm status made as much sense in Republican Shanghai as it did in Jacksonian America, because of the growth of light industries that relied heavily on women's and children's labor. Households with "ladies" could always set themselves apart from families whose "mill girls" stuck them firmly in the working class (Lerner 1969). For Ningpo people, with the reputation of their native place and their financial elite to uphold, leisured ladies in the home were a vital status symbol.

Moreover, by denying that they had any working women, Ningpo people could also silence one part of the debate about class conflict within the Ningpo community. The question of women's work in the Republican period always posed the question of class conflict: for the liberal middle class, women's work was a question of "human rights," for the working class, it was a question of higher pay and better hours (Mei Sheng 1929, v. 2:62–65). The cult of domesticity sidestepped the class conflict entirely.

But this analysis of the Ningpo cult of domesticity, based on a Western model, does not carry us very far.

Second lens: foreign influence

In China the contradiction between the lady and the mill girl was not simply the product of industrialization. It was sharpened by the rise of nationalism. Beginning in the late Qing reform period, after 1900, both ladies and mill girls were at the contradictory center of the nation – building effort. Women's roles in the new nation were controversial. On the one hand, women were the workers who would transform China into a modern industrial power: "Women workers can double productivity and

with it government tax revenue!" (Li and Chang 1975: I, 706–8). On the other hand, women were the mothers who kept the homes where modern citizens of the realm could be nurtured: "Women in the home manage the family, and the family is the basic unit of local self-government!" (Li and Chang 1975:II,973). As in the West, the proper role of women in industrialization was hotly debated in Republican China. But women's roles were also closely associated with national pride and national – even cultural – identity.

Debates about women's roles, then, were not merely an emblem of class consciousness. They were also part of a discourse generated in the process of confronting imperialism and what the Chinese later came to call "semi-colonialism." In general, the discourse attempted to make China's women more "like" women in the West. But the West itself presented conflicting models. Thus we find Republican writers lauding the model of "good wives, wise mothers," celebrating Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, listening to Margaret Sanger's lectures, translating articles about the suffrage movement in England. Founding of child care centers, revulsion against footbinding,⑨ the rise of women's educational institutions – all were consciously inspired by Western examples, and all led in different directions. Awareness of the debt to foreigners bordered on the obsequious in some circles, as in the following speech at the Shanghai's Women's Club

⑨ Writing in 1916, Mary Gamewell noted (p. 159) that "[b]ound feet are becoming less and less the fashion in Shanghai. The increasing spread of physical training in all the schools is a great aid in favour of anti–footbinding, for the popular exercises can not well be taken on tiny feet. A medium course at present much in vogue is neither to let the feet alone nor bind them tightly, but by the use of comparatively loose bandages to prevent their growing too large. The little bound feet of old, common enough still in the interior, are in Shanghai generally looked upon with shame by the younger generation, who if they are so unfortunate as to own them, try to conceal their crippled members underneath long skirts or by wearing large shoes." See Gamewell (1916:169) for a photo of schoolgirls in a gymnasium drill.

(Hutchinson 1924, quoted in Croll 1978:87):

"It is not flattery to say that Chinese women look for feminist ideals and inspiration from America. From American missionaries Chinese girls first imbibed the sense of human personality which their menfolk for ages past had all but denied them. From American schools they learned the comforting strength of an independent mind and the sweetness of real freedom; from American homes they drank in the wholesome atmosphere of domestic harmony with which they are making normal the Chinese household; from the high-spirited and achieving American woman they have received the lesson of self-respecting and self-reliant character, whether it be in taking up a professional career, or entering the ranks of breadwinners, or home-building."

Whether all these foreign ideas were directly influential or not, they heightened people's consciousness about women's roles in industrializing Shanghai, and helped to place "the woman question" at the center of Shanghai's agenda for modernizing.

Third lens: Ningpo traditionalism and conservatism

Still, of all the roles proposed for women in the international lexicon, Ningpo people espoused only one: women as homemakers. They rejected the idea of professional careers for women, and they absolutely drew the line at advocating that women support the family. Was their homemaker ideal inspired at all, then, by foreign examples or influence? Listening to their language and their arguments, I concluded that foreign influence was impossible to detect in Ningpo explanations for women's proper behavior.

What stood out in their accounts was not foreign, but Confucian thought. Time and again as I interviewed, I heard women refer to the *fu-tao*, the "wifely way" that has been a hallmark of Confucian texts since

the earliest classics. All the elderly women I interviewed were familiar with the classical four womanly virtues valorized in Confucian texts, and all of them defended the notion of a separate sphere that was set forth clearly as early as the Book of Rites.

Confucian classics as early as the *Chou li* had articulated an ideology of "separate spheres" for women and men. This Chinese cult of domesticity ("women's sphere") was described as *hsing–pieh* (separation of the sexes). The idea of *pieh*, discrimination, was essential to the proper maintenance of human relationships (*jen–lun*); the binary opposition of male and female was homologous with the binary opposition of high and low, elder and younger, superior and inferior, *yang* and *yin*, that ordered the entire human and cosmological world.[10]

Situated at the cutting edge of Shanghai's international economy, and eager to cosmopolitanize their business dealings with the foreigner [one Ningpo Guild journal has a long article urging that Ningpo be made into the Boston of China], Ningpo people continued to identify themselves with the standards of the old Confucian elite in their ritual and domestic affairs [the reason they picked Boston is that it combined commercial/coastal vitality with preeminent intellectual achievement – their admiration for academic centers was clearly inspired by Confucian, not Western, examples.] They endowed charitable estates back in their home villages, invoked classical virtues in the construction of guild halls and the mortuaries for Ningpo sojourners who died away from home, and eulogized female paradigms

---

[10] Unlike the ideology of separate spheres in the West, Confucian thought from the beginning connected women's domestic roles to the health of the body politic. Cott (1977:199–200) notes the connection made by both Puritans and Jacksonians between "the foundations of national morality" and the "private family." One of the most famous passages in the Four Books places the family at the center of the polity, and every important didactic textbook for women published in Qing times stressed the vital importance of good mothering for the rearing of loyal and upright sons, not to mention the correcting of wayward husbands.

of Confucian virtue in their monthly guild journal. Few of their views on women reflect foreign influence of any kind.⑪

Fourth lens: the sojourner strategy

There is still a further sense–making step to take in understanding the complex of values and associations underlying the Ningpo cult of domesticity. It has to do with the way people construct values in the course of their daily lived experience. Just as Western ideologies of domesticity were constructed by men and women as agents working in a distinctive economic and social environment (Ryan 1981), so the Ningpo ideology of domesticity developed in a particular local political economy.

Historically, the ideology developed as Ningpo men sojourned abroad to make their living. Before the growth of the treaty ports, they traveled as merchants, brokers, petty traders, and seafarers, able to count on a network of kin and guild for succour and for credit when they found themselves far from home. They always maintained a home in Ningpo, however; that home, and the land on which it rested, was necessarily the domain of their womenfolk and retired old men who were left behind. Keeping women at home, then, was a mainstay of Ningpo's political economy, the strategy

⑪ The exception here is the primary school system founded by Ningpo Guild members from 1923 to 1929; these schools were coeducational and progressive on female education, distinctively "modern" in their orientation. See *Ning–po Lü Hu t'ung–hsiang–hui ke–hsiao–hsueh hsueh–wu hui–k'an* (15 December 1931). In 1946, there were 983 males and 631 females enrolled in guild–sponsored primary schools (THHYK new ser.4 [10 October 1946]:6); in 1947, 1444 males and 925 females (THHHK 21–22 [15 January 1948]. Sometime before 1927, the Guild began admitting women to membership, a development that still awaits study. See figures in THHYK new ser. 4 (10 October 1946):4, which show 1,399 women in a total guild membership of 34,968. Bryna Goodman's study of Shanghai guilds (forthcoming, University of California Press) reveals new dimensions of female participation in the guilds, which was nonetheless extremely limited.

that made their sojourning possible.

On the home front, it follows, women were accustomed to being in charge: time after time, asked what the most distinctive trait of a Ningpo woman was, my informants told me, with gusto, "Ningpo women can handle anything!" (*Ning–po fu–nü tsui neng-kan*!)

Fifth lens: the Ningpo mother–in–law

The other side of female seclusion in Ningpo, it appears, was the matrifocal household ruled by the omnicompetent matriarch. This brings me to the final sense–making step in understanding the cult of domesticity in Shanghai's Ningpo community. Time after time in my interviews, as I asked about these sojourning strategies, I was told the same story. The young bride in Ningpo, at the time of her marriage, moved in with her mother–in–law. While her husband sojourned abroad, she remained there in the company of women and children. Her husband returned home once or twice a year for the holidays, or more often, if she didn't conceive promptly enough to suit her mother–in–law. Ningpo families who moved en masse to Shanghai still found mother– in–law in need of solicitous care and attention.

The mother–in–law/daughter–in–law relationship, so starkly intimate in Ningpo, reminds us of yet another distinctive feature of the Ningpo case. Unlike the conjugal family systems of England and North America, homelands of the Victorian cult of domesticity, the Chinese was a joint family system. Newly married Chinese couples did not establish their own households after marriage. Instead, sons remained at home with their parents, and brides moved in with their in-laws – husband's parents, his brothers (if married, their wives and offspring too), and his unmarried sisters. The hitch in this system for the Ningpo bride – and the reason

why Shanghai people all said "a Ningpo mother-in-law is the worst!"⑫ – was that with the menfolk all away in Shanghai, the daughter-in-law was left – *tsui neng-kan* or no – to become the virtual slave of her mother-in-law. Several women told me that as soon as they entered their marital household, their mothers-in-law quit working entirely ("The minute I got there, she shut herself up in her room and spent the rest of her life telling her Buddhist devotional beads; she never did another bit of work." "We had a servant, but I was the one who had to wait on my mother-in-law: I had to boil water and serve her tea in the morning, and help her to wash her face and hair, and fix her special dishes if she was feeling poorly.") The Ningpo daughter-in-law could handle everything, all right, and she did: all the cooking, cleaning, sewing, nursing, and childcare for her mother-in-law.

Understandably, when the time came to select a son's bride, Ningpo mothers had no interest in a young woman who planned to work outside the home. In fact, a number of women told me that they did not go out to work until 1958, nearly a decade after the Communist revolution. Why so late, I asked? "Oh, I wanted to go out to work, but my mother-in-law wouldn't let me."

More powerful than the Communist Party, the Ningpo mother-in-law stood at the center of the Ningpo cult of domesticity. Supporting her were not only her emotional ties with her son, but the complex Shanghai lexicon of Republican, nationalist, localist, and Confucian ideologies, all of which legitimized the cult of domesticity that ensured her a leisurely old age.

Conclusion

⑫ *Ning-po p'o-p'o tsui li-hai* – my informants laughed ruefully when they said this. See also Zhang and Sang 1987:53.

The closer we look, then, the more different from Victorian ideologies the Ningpo cult of domesticity appears. But that does not mean that we cannot learn something important from a comparison. Let me cite just one example. In describing the cult of domesticity in New England, Nancy Cott complains that in New England, women's roles in the national polity were "confined to" child–rearing, influencing their husbands, and activities in church. But in China Buddhism did not offer women an organizational structure for influencing community action or public opinion. Instead, in the Chinese case, Ningpo women's influence in the "outer" sphere was felt exclusively through their role as wives and mothers. The church in U.S. history was not a confining sphere, but an institution that dramatically extended the formal and informal influence of women in the communities of New England. By contrast, the absence of church or any legitimate organization outside the home for purveying ideologies of domesticity in China is striking.⑬ Cross–cultural comparison, then, can lead us to reassess the historical significance of certain institutions in the history of women.

The Ningpo cult of domesticity and its Victorian counterpart also have something very important in common. Both were attempts to affirm and strengthen a grip on high status during a period of rapid social and economic change.⑭ That women were both subject and object in that

⑬ One could cite other examples: the limited opportunities for "sisterhood" among Chinese women who remained at home (Stockard's work on the Canton Delta underscores the significance of this difference); the absence of a mystification of the home as a center of magical happiness and a source of "blessedness" for women, as it was in New England. (In fact, the Chinese idea of women's service in the home often implied service to other women whom one frankly expected to make one unhappy.)

⑭ This paper has not detailed the dramatically changing context of the Ningpo ideology of domesticity [see also the appendix], which came under increasing pressure from the very success of the Ningpo community in situating itself at the top of Shanghai's economy and society. For example, the ten primary schools

struggle for status seems to be the most telling characteristic of the cult of domesticity wherever we find it.

Appendix Notes on the controversy over women's sphere

For many of the Ningpo women I interviewed, staying home did not mean depending on spouse for a living. In fact, precisely because these women were tied to the home and dependent on remittances from distant men, wages and income-earning strategies that the women themselves could control were a vital concern. Few considered the home a haven from the working world. To survive, wives of sojourning husbands – especially in wartime – had to have a source of income of their own. When the war destroyed urban labor markets and also the supply of imported materials for handicraft industries, many of these women became beggars and charcoal gatherers who supported not only themselves but the menfolk

sponsored by the guild enrolled female students and employed female teachers (albeit in small numbers); opportunities for travel abroad as well as work outside the home broke down barriers to commingling of the sexes, and so on. The Ningpo Guild Hall was obliged to issue regulations requiring female members to remain on the ground floor of the guild's guest house and avoid the upstairs rooms where male members were lodged, following the admission of women to membership (THHYK 49 [August 1927]:10). Ningpo women were also founding members of many of the new postwar women's organizations in Shanghai: the Shanghai Society for the Advancement of Professional Women [Shang-hai shih fu-nü shih-yeh ts'u-chin hui], the Union of Shanghai Women Workers [Shang-hai shih lao-tung fu-nü lien-i hui], the Union of Shanghai Housewives [Shang-hai shih chia-t'ing fu-nü lien-i hui], the Shanghai Society for the Improvement of Women's Lives [Shang-hai shih fu-nü sheng-huo kai-chin hui]. (See lists of members in the Shanghai Municipal Archives, nos. 6.5.880, 6.5.889, 6.5.895, 6.5.864.) In Shanghai some "modern" couples were already opting for neolocal residence, abandoning the joint family, by the mid-1930s (Auscough 1937:66–67).

who had retreated home unemployed. We should not imagine, then, that the story told for the Ningpo community represented anything more than ideal for the majority of Ningpo women.

As in Victorian society, in industrializing Shanghai there was no consensus on women's roles.⑮ Throughout the Republican period, in fact, the issue of women's work remained a center of controversy. Socialists, "nationalists," and anarchists were split down the middle by "the woman question," which made havoc of distinctions between left and right. Socialists, looking to empower the working class, wanted men and women shoulder to shoulder in the mills. Nationalists wanted a nation of "ladies" overseeing the home. Early Republican programs touting "local self-government" were profoundly committed to an image of women as housewives; the franchise was the last thing on their minds, in spite of what someone told Mrs. Pankhurst. And anarchists, convinced that all workers were nothing more than tools of the bourgeoisie, opposed all forms of women's factory labor. To anarchists, women workers in the factories represented one of the four most exploited groups in society, their station above that of prostitutes and indentured servants, but their real fate tantamount to the same thing. All were vulnerable to sexual abuse, all were forced to sell or violate their bodies in the name of earning a living (Li and Chang 1975: I, 712–19).⑯

On the other hand, Republicans and socialists both saw a place for women outside the home. Housewives who joined the patriotic women's associations and women's reform societies to hear travel lectures and

---

⑮ Documentary collections speak for themselves. On China, see Li and Chang 1975 and Mei Sheng 1929. On Victorian society, see Helsinger et al. 1983. Nivard 1984 documents changes in the outlook of one middle class women's journal between 1915 and 1931.

⑯ Ningpo mothers-in-law had a different version of this view: they told their sons that all factory women were "loose women."

programs on banning tobacco and opium became intimately involved – like their Victorian counterparts – in the public life of the men of the Republic (Li and Chang 1975: II, 961– 73). Workers needed protection and sanctuary in higher wages and education to upgrade their skills and make them more economically independent; housewives needed to reach out from the sanctuary of the home into the community to transform society according to their own high standards.

Conflicts over women's roles in the modern world brought a still another response from Chinese intellectuals who, like Ramohan Roy, turned back to their own cultural heritage for validation of ideas about women's proper roles in the new industrial world. Hu Shih, T'ang Liang–li, and Lin Yu–tang all retraced the history of prominent women in China, beginning with Ban Chao, to celebrate the extraordinary influence of educated mothers and talented women in Confucian culture (Croll 1978:159). At the same time, the "feminine mystique" fostered by the New Life Movement valorized sexual difference and attacked programs to educate and promote women for positions traditionally occupied by men (Croll 1978:160– 62).[17]

Tensions in the 20th–century discourse on domesticity in China could also be traced to the classics, because "work" was one of the four quintessential "womanly attributes" described in classical texts. Handwork, in particular, was the mark of frugality, discipline, and service that marked the good wife and mother, even in the highest aristocratic families, according to late imperial thought. The Chinese joint family had no place for the Victorian lady of leisure, even as an ideal; women were expected to work visibly with their hands, especially waiting on their mothers–in–law.

---

[17] For other critiques of the feminine mystique, see the heavily sarcastic commentaries in *Nü sheng* (Women's cry) 2.20–21 (10 August 1934):2–3, 3.4 (30 November 1934):2–3.

Even mothers-in-law were not viewed as leisured, but as recuping from the arduous labors of a lifetime. The problem, of course, was not work itself, but rather "going out" to work, which was a violation of women's sphere. Here the discourse turned modern, with resonance in its Victorian counterpart. Much of the writing of the Republican era conflates women's work outside the home with prostitution; women who "went out" were loose women, or risked being judged promiscuous (Rosen 1982; Li and Chang 1975, I:712–19).⑱

A "down-to-earth" discussion of the women question in an article published during the war described women at a "crossroads," facing four choices. To the left was the socialist road, so to speak, "turning women into men" (*nan-tzu-hua*), in which women would do exactly what men did, and all housework and childcare would be socialized. To the right, no more desirable (in the writer's view), was the classical model in which women's only identity lay in sexuality and reproduction, their only function in society the "natural" function of staying home and rearing children. To the north and south lay compromises. A woman might decide to give her life to her work, neglecting her children and leaving them to the care of an ignorant, incompetent old woman (in the case described in lurid detail, the mother's price for her dedication to her job was the death of her child, who received improper medical attention due to the babysitter's ignorance). This option was described as completely irrational, portraying women blindly devoted to careers, taking jobs that "anyone could do" just in order to be seen going out to work and assuming their share of social responsibility, abandoning the mother role that they alone, obviously, were best equipped for.

---

⑱ Another "modern" aspect of the discourse appears in discussions of discipline and punishment, where reformers advocated women's work centers for female criminals. See Li and Chang I:708–712.

What choice remained? Advised the columnist: women should marry, women should also be educated, but they should understand that work is not the end–all. A woman who was truly talented and wished to pursue a special calling in fact should not marry; ideally, she should select an occupation that wouldn't affect her ability to carry out her responsibilities at home (Ch'en 1945:59).

Of course such messages were reserved for the small upper class of women who received an education and could entertain choices. Women from the intelligentsia were caught squarely in a conflict between Confucian values (upholding and maintaining their own cultural identity) and modern vocational training propelling them toward professional careers (Croll 1978: 168–72). But working class and peasant women were barely touched by these controversies. The irony of the Ningpo case is that the Ningpo community in Shanghai preserved a consciousness firmly rooted in Confucian traditions and barely exposed to the new ideas from foreign lands. The threat of factory work was real to them, but what it augured was understood in terms of a language they had always used.

References Cited

Ayscough, Florence. *Chinese Women: Yesterday and To–Day* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937).

Bergère, Marie–Claire. "'The Other China': Shanghai from 1919 to 1949," in *Shanghai: Revolution and Development in an Asian Metropolis*, ed. Christopher Howe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1–34.

Ch'en T'ing–chen 陳庭珍, comp. *K'ang–chan i–lai fu–nü wen–t'i yen–lun chi* 抗戰以來婦女問題言論集 (Collected writings on the women question during the war of resistance against Japan; n.p. [Shanghai?]: Ch'ing–nien ch'u–pan–she, 1945; photocopy edition Taipei: Chung–kuo Kuo–min–tang Chung–yang wei–yuan–hui, Tang–shih wei–yuan–

hui, 1976.)

Cott, Nancy. *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

Croll, Elisabeth. *Feminism and Socialism in China* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978).

Darwent, Rev. C. E. *Shanghai: A Handbook for Travellers and Residents* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1920; reprinted Taipei: Ch'eng Wen, 1983).

Gamewell, Mary Ninde. *The Gateway to China: Pictures of Shanghai* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1916).

Ku Mi 雇密. "Fu-nü wen-t'i yü fu-nü lao-tung wen-t'i" 婦女問題與婦女勞動問題 (The woman question and the problem of women workers). In Mei Sheng 梅生, ed. *Chung-kuo fu-nü wen-t'i t'ao-lun chi* 中國婦女問題討論集 (Collected articles on the woman question in China) (Shanghai: Hsin-wen-hua shu-she, 1929), vol. 2, pp. 62–65.

Helsinger, Elizabeth, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder, eds. *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837–1883.* 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

Hershatter, Gail. "The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution, 1870– 1949." *Modern China* 15.4 (October 1989): 463–498.

Hershatter, Gail. "Prostitution and the Market in Women in Early Twentieth-Century Shanghai." In Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, eds. *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 256–285.

Honig, Emily. "The Politics of Prejudice: Subei People in Republican-Era Shanghai." *Modern China* 15.3 (1989): 243–74.

Honig, Emily. *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

Lerner, Gerda. "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson." *Mid-Continental American Studies Journal* 10 (1969):5–15.

Li Yu-ning 李又寧 and Chang Yü-fa 張玉法, comp. *Chin-tai Chung-kuo fu-ch'üan*

yun-tung shih-liao, 1842-1911 近代中國婦權運動史料 (Historical materials on the women's movement in modern China, 1842-1911). 2 vols. (Taipei: Chuan-chi wen-hsueh-she, 1975).

Mei Sheng 梅生, ed. *Chung-kuo fu-nü wen-t'i t'ao-lun chi* 中國婦女問題討論集 (Collected articles on the woman question in China). 6 vols. (Shanghai: Hsin-wen-hua shu-she, 1929).

Myers, Ramon H. *The Chinese Economy, Past and Present* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1980).

Nathan, Andrew J. *Chinese Democracy.* 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1985).

Ning-po Lü Hu t'ung-hsiang-hui ke-hsiao-hsueh hsueh-wu hui-k'an 甯波旅滬同鄉會各小學學務彙刊 (Periodical review of the scholastic programs of the primary schools sponsored by the Ningpo Guild in Shanghai; Shanghai: Ning-po T'ung-hsiang- hui.)

Ning-po pang: ch'i-ye-chia te chüeh-ch'i 甯波幫企業家的崛起 (The Ningpo clique: The rise to prominence of a group of industrialists). Che-chiang wen-shih tse-liao hsien-chi #39 (Hsiao-shan: Che-chiang jen-min chu'-pan-she, 1989).

Nivard, Jacqueline. "Women and the Women's Press: The Case of *The Ladies' Journal* (Funü zazhi), 1915-1931." *Republican China* 10.1b (November 1984): 37-56.

Rawski, Thomas G. *Economic Growth in Prewar China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

Rosen, Ruth. *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

Ryan, Mary P. *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

THHHK *Ning-po Lü Hu t'ung-hsiang-hui hui-k'an* 甯波旅滬同鄉會會刊 (The journal of the Ningpo Guild in Shanghai).

THHYK *Ning-po Lü Hu t'ung-hsiang-hui yue-k'an* 甯波旅滬同鄉會月刊 (The monthly journal of the Ningpo Guild in Shanghai).

Zhang Xinxin and Sang Ye. *Chinese Lives: An Oral History of Contemporary China.* Ed. W.J.F. Jenner and Delia Davin (New York: Pantheon, 1987).